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SUBJECT: T&T CHIEF JUSTICE SCANDAL CONTINUES

REF: PORT OF SPAIN 00615

¶1. The furor over allegations that Trinidad and Tobago's Chief Justice, Satnarine Sharma, sought to improperly influence Chief Magistrate Sherman McNicols in the Panday corruption case (reftel) has not died down. Police investigations, including searches of the Chief Justice's office, are ongoing. The newspapers report that the investigation is in its final stages, and that the Director of Public Prosecutions will soon receive a complete report from the police. CJ Sharma has held a number of meetings with high-profile political figures, including a meeting with Sir Ellis Clarke, regarded as T&T's "wise old man" of public life. Also, Sharma held at least two meetings with President Richards before Richards left for Germany to watch the Soca Warriors compete in the FIFA World Cup.

¶2. The Opposition United National Congress (UNC) continues to paint the investigation in a sinister light. The UNC also continues to insist, in the print media and on the party's website, that Chief Magistrate McNicols' allegedly suspicious land deal be further investigated. Newly re-accepted UNC member and Panday lawyer Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj works the land deal and supposed abuse of public power by the ruling People's National Movement (PNM) in this case into all of his public speeches in an effort to both exonerate Panday and hammer the PNM.

¶3. Most recently, Prime Minister Manning, through his lawyers, asked that part of Sharma's public statement and sworn affidavit in the judicial review proceedings of the most recent allegations of misconduct against Sharma be disallowed. Manning claims that the statements are hearsay and that some of statements were made in confidence during mediation proceedings over Manning's 2005 impeachment attempt against Sharma. In 2005, Manning began proceedings against Sharma for attempting to influence the outcome of a murder case against Vijay Naraynsingh, an associate of Sharma's. Mediation for this process came to an end in May 2006 and will proceed to court.

¶4. COMMENT: The entire situation continues to be murky at best, and the actual details are unlikely to be clarified any time soon. Manning's most recent request indicates that the court process, when it begins, will be played especially close to the vest, with neither side likely to let any information get out. Speculation in the rumor mill indicates that one of Sharma's two meetings with Richards included discussions on the timing of the appointment of an acting president while Richards was out of the country; in other words, a routine meeting. The other meeting possibly discussed ways for Sharma to extricate himself from the situation. Another indicator that Sharma may

be on the way out is an increase in reports about the "toll on Sharma's health" that the scandal has had. Possibly, Sharma is positioning himself to withdraw with dignity under the cover of health concerns. If this happens, Manning will have achieved his purported initial goal: removal of Sharma without a lengthy, and politically risky, impeachment process. END COMMENT.

AUSTIN